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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 006029

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SENV](#) [KWBG](#) [JO](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: JORDAN'S RED-DEAD POSTURING--YOU'RE EITHER WITH US
. . . . OR WE'LL DO IT ALONE

REF: A) TEL AVIV 5271 B) AMMAN 5999 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CDA DAVID HALE, Reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Jordan,s Planning and Water Ministers, Bassem Awadallah and Hazim El-Naser, insisted to visiting NEA Senior Science Advisor Charles Lawson that the Red Sea - Dead Sea Conveyance (RDC) project feasibility study must happen. If the Israelis and Palestinians cannot put the politics of such a project aside, "Jordan will go it alone," each minister said separately. GOJ environment-friendly arguments about saving the Dead Sea have been overtaken by the desalination component of the RDC. Water is Jordan,s biggest challenge, and the pressure is on to identify new sources to cope with an unsustainably high birthrate and increasing demand. The long-term solution lies in the RDC, argued Awadallah, who was caught off balance when asked to consider alternative water sources.

¶2. (C) Anxious not to lose the spotlight gained at this summer,s extraordinary session of the WEF at the Dead Sea, Jordan remains resolved to raise the issue at the upcoming Dubai IFI meetings (something allegedly agreed to between King Abdullah and WB President Wolfensohn) to encourage key donors to fund the feasibility study. Lawson cautioned that without Israeli and Palestinian buy-in donors will likely be reluctant to support the RDC. Separately, Israeli MFA Multilateral Peace Process Director Yaakov Keidar told us that domestic political considerations in Israel were driving Jerusalem,s reluctance to support this project; only PM Sharon could unblock the Israeli-Palestinian political impasse and move forward at this stage. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) Jordanian officials made their displeasure with Israel,s perceived foot-dragging on the draft Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Red Sea - Dead Sea Conveyance (RDC) feasibility study known to NEA Senior Science Advisor Charles Lawson during a series of meetings in Amman September 14-16. Explicit in those exchanges were comments from Jordanian Minister of Planning, Bassem Awadallah, and Minister of Water and Irrigation, Hazim el-Naser, that "we are going to do it," regardless of the Palestinians and Israelis. Awadallah related to Lawson that "the King is resolved like nothing else" to conduct the RDC feasibility study (and ostensibly construct the full-scale project).

¶4. (C) Explaining that Jordan took a risk last year in Johannesburg, rolling out the project with the Israelis, Awadallah said that Jordan will move forward with or without a resolution of Palestinian-Israeli political differences. "We can,t miss any international opportunity to promote this," he added, looking forward to the September 23-24 World Bank-IMF meetings in Dubai at which he expects the Bank to gather a small group of key donors for a presentation on the RDC. The next possible venue to champion the RDC would not present itself until next May,s WEF at the Dead Sea, unacceptably stalling progress on the project, Awadallah said. (Note: Jordanian Water Minister El-Naser and Israeli Infrastructure Minister Yosef Paritzky have discussed the possibility of a Red-Dead session at the January WEF meeting in Davos. End note.)

¶5. (C) Now that both the Palestinians and Israelis had entrenched political positions on the draft TOR, Awadallah felt somewhat boxed in by the World Bank,s requirement of "letters of intent" to participate from the Israelis and Palestinians. He bemoaned the fact that Israel had taken so long to respond to the draft TOR and, when the comments arrived last week, raised issues of sovereignty and political objections that threaten to derail the project.

¶6. (C) Lawson confirmed Awadallah,s fears, relating the gist of his September 8-11 meetings with Israeli officials on the topic (Ref A) and underscoring the concern of both Israelis and Palestinians about language in the TOR that may be prejudicial to future final status negotiations. In an effort to bridge the gap, Lawson told Awadallah that he had encouraged the Israelis and Palestinians to focus only on the technical aspects of the study. It was becoming clearer, however, that Jordan and movement on the RDC are hostage to Israeli and Palestinian political posturing. Further, Lawson commented, while the Israelis and Palestinians wish to

support Jordan in its quest for additional water, neither of them anticipates large benefits from the project itself, making them less flexible in their willingness to abandon their political positions.

17. (C) According to Awadallah, he had received a commitment, in principle, from Palestinian Minister of Planning Nabil Kassis to support Jordan on the RDC. (NOTE: This doesn't jibe with what we heard last week in Ramallah from Kassis, who said that the Palestinian's riparian status, as described in the draft TOR, was non-negotiable. (Ref A).) Awadallah said that El-Naser's positive meeting with Israeli Minister of Infrastructure Paritsky in Aqaba on August 28 had led the Jordanians to believe that they had achieved consensus on a trilateral technical committee for the RDC. So, Awadallah asserted, it was with disappointment and frustration that they learned of Israeli reluctance to approve the draft TOR as written by the World Bank.

18. (C) Lawson received a similar exasperated readout on the RDC feasibility study from Water Minister El-Naser. Referring to the Israeli comments on the draft TOR, the minister said "Jordan questions Israel's interest in the project; we are suspicious of their intentions." While he talked positively of the "preferred option to work together with the Palestinians and Israelis," El-Naser confirmed that Jordan is prepared to move ahead alone. According to El-Naser, the King said, "if they do not want to join in, we will do it anyway." Confirming Awadallah's hints, El-Naser said, "We are no more environmentally conscious than the Israelis or Palestinians; we are in need of the water" from this project. "After 2015 we have no more new resources to tap," he added. This was the first such admission to us by a GOJ official--and no less the one who has spearheaded the marketing of Red - Dead as a "Save the Dead Sea" scheme, not just a large scale desalination project.

19. (C) El-Naser said Jordan will proceed with the RDC, regardless of Israeli or Palestinian involvement. Explaining that a modified version of the mega-project would involve only desalination of Red Sea water, he claimed it could be built for about US \$700 million. (Comment: That price would be for the construction of the conveyance itself only. The cost of constructing the desalination facilities would be an additional US \$1-2 billion, depending on the final capacity desired. End comment.) When asked about seeking neighboring states, approval for conducting such a project with significant transboundary physical and environmental repercussions, he said that Israel does not seem to care about the sewage it dumps into the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea. Why should Jordan be held accountable to more stringent standards, El-Naser asked rhetorically?

10. (C) Lawson queried El-Naser about identifying new sources of water (other than the RDC desalination scheme) for the country. The minister was non-responsive. He did not want to talk about desalination options on the Gulf of Aqaba, the water from which could be pumped to Amman through the Disi Aquifer project pipeline. Nor was he receptive to reopening discussions about a possible Mediterranean - Dead Sea canal, which many hydrologists agree is more economically feasible and less disruptive environmentally. Lawson got a similar disinterested response from Awadallah on RDC alternatives.

11. (C) We understand from the Israeli DCM that the newly accredited Israeli Ambassador, Yacov Hades Handlesman, got a very direct appeal from El-Naser to support the RDC feasibility study during this first meeting on September 15. El-Naser did not mince words about Jordan's frustration and disappointment over Israel's politicization of the TOR. El-Naser claims he has argued with the Israelis that this is a technical study, which can be sanitized of political stumbling blocks if the parties so desire.

12. (C) On the margins of another Arab-Israeli multilateral meeting, Israeli MFA Multilateral Peace Process Director Yacov Keidar told us domestic political considerations are holding up more ardent Israeli support for the RDC project. At present, it was politically untenable to enter into any kind of agreement or activity that hints at Palestinian sovereignty. The Israeli public would not stand for it and no politician would put his/her name to it, despite Israel's unfailing desire to support Jordan as a peace partner. It would take PM Sharon, Keidar asserted, to make this delicate decision; he underscored the Israeli Embassy's recommendation to El-Naser that Jordanian PM Abul Ragheb phone Sharon directly.

13. (C) COMMENT: Without Israeli and Palestinian consensus on the World Bank's TOR we believe the RDC feasibility study is ill-fated. Should Jordan proceed alone, it lays itself open to criticism from its neighbors and the international community, and sets itself up for charges of conducting a biased study aimed at promoting the project's feasibility. Also, international donors are unlikely to provide funding for a Jordan-only feasibility study. Both Awadallah and

El-Naser, joint architects of Jordan's mega-project, have the most to gain from successful implementation of the RDC and remain its biggest advocates. Of course, with the most personal equities invested, they also have the most to lose. King Abdullah has bought into the scheme. However, we question whether senior Jordanian officials have sufficiently explored cheaper and more practical options for securing new water resources for one of the world's most water starved countries.

HALE